

Best laid plans



Steve and Janine Carney set out to build an oak frame home for themselves, but an objection from the planners – and a change of heart – turned the project into a sizeable annexe for Janine's parents instead

WORDS JANE CRITTENDEN PHOTOS NIKHILESH HAVAL

At first glance, you could mistake this fine oak frame building for a handsome individual house attached to the Victorian property next door. In reality, it's a substantial annexe, evolved from a concept for a completely separate dwelling. "The planners refused our application to build an oak frame house in our garden, but allowed us to develop a self-contained annexe attached to our home," explains Steve Carney. "The design is pretty much the same, but it's crazy as the annexe is 433m² and nearly twice the size of our original plans."

Steve and his wife, Janine, live here with their children, Bobbie, 13 and Charlie, 25 (Jack, 26, and Jamie, 31, work in the yachting industry and return here when they're not sailing). The couple decided to embark on a self-build journey after years of renovating houses, both here in the UK and in Normandy, France, where Steve's parents live. Many of the projects involved working with traditional oak framing, including their own holiday home.

"Our holiday house is a stone build, with lovely exposed oak beams," says Steve. "We spent a long time restoring it to how it had been and really enjoyed the work. So when we decided to self-build, the house was only ever going to be constructed with oak."

The couple lived in an 1890s Victorian house in West Kirby, with a large one-acre garden. Steve had his eye on a rocky sandstone outcrop next to their property, which was too harsh to grow anything on. "It was such a waste of space," he says. "At the beginning, the plan was to build a new home on this site and sell our existing house."

Steve, who runs a decorating business, sketched out a design for an oak frame property, back in 2015. The goal was for the new dwelling to look as though it had always been there, using materials that blended in with the brick, sandstone and timber of their Victorian home. "We liked the vaulted ceilings of our French holiday property, but we were mindful that old buildings get cold and damp in winter," says Steve. "We wanted to replicate the look, but have all the latest technology so the house felt comfortable all year round."

Plot twists

The couple visited a few self-build exhibitions for inspiration, then their joiner friend, Roy Corker – who the couple had brought over to France to work on their renovation projects – introduced Steve to Welsh Oak Frame. Roy had been employed on one of their projects and had worked with posts and beams first-hand.

A stunning glazed gable design gives impact to both the outside and inside of the annexe, where Albert and Cathy have arranged seating to enjoy the views of Wales in the distance

"Roy said the house was a modern version of the old French properties," says Steve. "I went to have a look and was very impressed with Welsh Oak Frame's workmanship. Later, Janine and I met with company owner, Paul Edmunds and one of the design directors. We saw their workshop in Wales and were confident they were the right company to go with."

Welsh Oak Frame took Steve's drawings and came up an appealing design, taking heed of the difficulties of building into the rocky outcrop. Steve did some number crunching and had some concerns that they might struggle to afford to build the house. He and Janine also pondered who might move into their current home if they were to sell it. "We're quite secluded here and we weren't sure how we'd feel about having such close neighbours, especially if we didn't know them personally," he admits.

A surprise turn of events flipped the project on its head. Janine's parents, Albert and Cathy Mitchell, showed an interest in the new house. When Steve showed them Welsh Oak Frame's plans, they were so taken by the design that they said this was their dream home. Coming up to retirement, they wanted to split their time between the UK and their house in Spain, and were looking for a property they could safely lock-up and leave. They suggested to Steve and Janine that they would be more than happy to fund the build and live in the oak frame house themselves.

"It sounds crazy but Albert and Cathy's proposal actually worked for us all," says Steve. "They didn't want the hassle of looking after an old house, they'd be near to us and our kids, and we could keep an eye on the property while they were away. For us, we were having



Left: The second living room is separate from the house to allow a social area/cinema room without having to access the main house. Instead, access is through double doors via the balcony

FACT FILE

NAMES Steve & Janie Carney, who built for Albert & Cathy Mitchell
OCCUPATIONS Owner of decorating business & HR manager
LOCATION Wirral
TYPE OF PROJECT Self build annexe
STYLE Traditional
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Masonry ground floor, oak frame first floor
PROJECT ROUTE Welsh Oak frame design, owner project managed
PLOT SIZE One acre
LAND COST Already owned
HOUSE SIZE 433m²
PROJECT COST £841,200
PROJECT COST PER M² £1,943
BUILDING WORK COMMENCED January 2017
BUILDING WORK TOOK 21 months

doubts about the finances, and in all honesty, the main driver for me was the challenge of building an oak frame house from scratch, which I'd still be able to do for them."

Planning & development

Albert and Cathy generously let Steve continue to have a free hand with his design ideas, although he consulted closely with them along the way. "I figured out where everything should go, right down to lighting, kitchen and bathroom layouts," he says. "I explained everything to them, mindful this wasn't my home, and we discussed all of the plans. They were very good to trust my judgement."

One of his ideas was to install a lift to come up from the garage. "I was thinking ahead to when Albert and Cathy get older," Steve explains. "They can get out of the car and into the lift with their shopping, step onto the balcony and walk straight into the kitchen. They don't have to use the stairs and are under cover all the way."

Steve had a number of pre-planning conversations to discuss the design before he submitted a formal application in spring 2016. "Planning kept knocking the design back as they felt the oak frame house would dominate the plot and our Victorian home, which went against their guidelines," Steve explains. "We understood the issues and decided to hire a planning consultant for advice."

The experts, Matthews & Goodman, deduced the couple would have better luck getting approval if the building became an annexe to their home, rather than a separate dwelling. Steve went back to Welsh Oak Frame, who altered the plans. "Although the building is an annexe, there's no access to our house," says Steve. "The link part forms an L-shape with two separate garages on the ground floor and a balcony and a room above. Welsh Oak Frame were great, they paid particular attention to how the roof tied in with our house without



Above: Subtle colour choices of off-white and pale grey place the kitchen discreetly in the open-plan room where the shaker design is a nod to the traditional oak framing. The limestone floor is fitted with underfloor heating



WE LEARNED...

DON'T GIVE UP on planning. There is often a way to achieve what you set out to do if you're willing to compromise.

A LOCAL PLANNING CONSULTANT is worth the investment as their expertise of development rules in the area will give you the best opportunity of building what you want.

WORKING WITH a company like Welsh Oak Frame was really worthwhile. They didn't just design and supply the oak frame, they helped create the whole house and were on hand to advise every step of the way. They were worth their weight in gold.

WE SOURCED reclaimed Yorkstone paving for the balcony to match the paving at the front, but the different thicknesses were tricky to work with, and it was much heavier than we anticipated. We had to put in another steel beam to carry the load.

making it dominate. Plus, when I asked them about a particular design feature, like the covered balcony, they'd come back with a solution. Everything was always possible."

This time, the council's planning department looked upon the design more favourably. Approval was given in late summer 2016, with the added bonus to have the annexe re-titled as a separate dwelling five years later if they wanted to. Part of the consent meant materials had to match the Carney's Victorian home, so the couple submitted brick samples for approval and had a special mortar mix made. Steve was also keen for the smaller architectural details to relate. "I designed the entrance of the annexe with arched doors and sandstone blocks to mirror the brick arch of our porch," he says.

Getting hands-on

Steve wanted to be involved in the scheme as much as possible, and in early 2017 with support from work colleagues, he began project-managing and working full time on the build. First up was organising

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Above: Steve designed the spacious ensuite, which has a walk-in shower behind the bath. The stone tiles add an extra layer of sophistication in a timeless style

In August 2017, the Welsh Oak Frame workshop team spent three weeks erecting the frame, with Steve helping out. When it came to the roof,

he applied his decorating expertise and thought ahead to the finish of the ceilings. "Oak naturally shrinks a little over time as it dries, and I didn't want a perimeter of unpainted plasterboard on the ceiling to reveal itself," he says. "We painted the inside of all the plaster boards, fixing them to the exposed beams and hiding the joints behind them as we went."

The perfect finish

By autumn, the house was watertight and Steve began calling in trades he knew through work and sourcing the best deals for building materials. The remainder of the project progressed steadily and the annexe was finished the following October.

Now, eye-catching vaulted ceilings on the first floor welcome all into the main living rooms, echoing the traditional style



the works to excavate the rocky outcrop and remove tonnes of sandstone to make a level platform. "Basically, we cut out a big piece of the hill and slotted a house into it," says Steve. "There were four massive dumper trucks working five days a week, for four weeks taking the sandstone away, but I had the cost in the budget so it wasn't unexpected." The tricky terrain impacted on the structure and construction method of the property, too, which Steve describes as "like building two different houses."

Above: Beautiful exposed beams frame the master bedroom, which leads through to a dressing room and ensuite beyond. Double doors opposite the bed open out on to the covered balcony

"Despite the various renovation projects I have worked on in the past, the annexe was something entirely different," says Steve. "We built a blockwork structure for the base, and then added a skin of engineering brick to all the front elevations for the ground floor. As this level is below ground on three sides, we tanked the blockwork to water-proof it, and there was no second chance to get this right." The first floor is constructed with a precast beam and block concrete floor and then the oak frame sits on top of this.

of the French houses that the couple renovated all those years before – minus the cold and damp. An air source heat pump extracts outside heat to warm the hot water and underfloor heating, while a mechanical ventilation and heat recovery system keeps the house at a comfortable temperature all year round.

Steve's really proud of how the project has turned out. "We were lucky with planning and Welsh Oak Frame's design expertise, as the annexe looks pretty much the same as the original house drawings," he says. "Albert and Cathy are over the moon, they love the open space, the light and the oak, and we're really pleased for them."

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closer look

Building on the rocky outcrop...

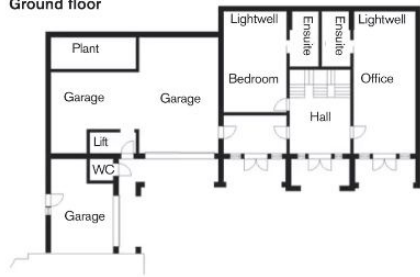
Welsh Oak Frame's interpretation of Steve's design took into account the difficulties of the rocky sandstone outcrop, set about a metre away from the side of the original house. The ground floor is built into the hill and contains two ensuite bedrooms, one of which has a kitchen/living room for guest accommodation. A rooflight system had to be designed to bring in natural light, and smart glass was used for privacy. The main living space – and master bedroom – is elevated on the first floor with balconies running across the front. Due to the steep gradient, the rear garden was developed at first floor level and is accessed through the utility room door or via the outside steps.



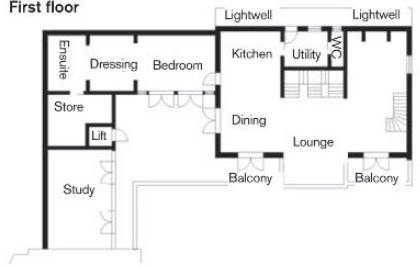
Steep plot

Floor plans

Ground floor



First floor



House plans re-created using Build It 3D Home Designer software. www.buildit.co.uk/3dsoftware

£ TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Surveys & fees	£33	2%	£14,500
Groundworks & foundations	£142	7%	£61,700
Oak frame	£166	9%	£72,000
External walls	£150	8%	£65,000
Roof	£99	5%	£43,000
Windows, glass & doors	£111	6%	£48,000
Staircase	£46	2%	£20,000
Wall & ceiling finishes/ plastering	£55	2%	£24,000
Joinery & fittings	£87	4%	£38,000
Plumbing & heating (inc. bathroom & kitchen)	£162	8%	£70,500
Electrics	£66	3%	£28,700
Decorating	£43	2%	£18,800
Floors	£57	2%	£25,000
Labour	£327	17%	£142,000
Materials & misc	£300	15%	£130,000
Landscaping	£8	5%	£40,000
Grand total			£841,200

Note: The costs shown here reflect the original prices for materials, labour and services at the time this project was undertaken. As a general guide, inflation in the construction market runs at about 3%-4% per annum.

Useful contacts

GROUNDWORKS & FOUNDATIONS **Alan J Griffiths** 01516 255990 www.alanjgriffiths.com OAK FRAME **Welsh Oak Frame** 01686 698000 www.welshoakframe.com ROOFING **Chris Buckley WINDOWS AND DOORS** **Simon Moorhouse Bespoke Joinery** 01686 411105 www.simon-moorhouse.com FLOOR & WALL TILING **Tile Image** 07979 942825 **JOINERY & CARPENTRY** **Roy Corker** 07785 941568 **PLUMBING & HEATING ENGINEER** **Hardins Installations** 07528 694048 www.hardins.co.uk **ELECTRICIAN** **CJ Electrical** 07771821994 **AIR SOURCE HEAT PUMP & MHVR** **Fervo** 0333 240 2121 www.fervo.co.uk **KITCHEN** **James James Kitchens** 0151 625 9329 jamesjameskitchens.net **BUILDING SUPPLIERS** **William Dodd** 0151 677 5668 www.williamdodd.co.uk **GARDEN DESIGN** **Rebecca Knjazev** at **Pegasus Group** 07584 471425 www.pegasusgroup.co.uk

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